

SCAFFOLDING INTERACTION IN ENGLISH AS A SECOND LANGUAGE CLASSROOM: A SOCIO - CULTURAL ANALYSIS

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ABSTRACT: *Scaffolding interaction (SI) is relevant to the teaching and learning of English as a second language as it emphasizes the interactive nature of learning, providing contingent and collaborative support (Walqui, 2006; Forman, 2008). The study examines how teachers' language use provides SI to view learning as a shared activity between teacher and learners, adopting a qualitative approach that draws data from a larger study to examine the concept of SI. The finding shows that teacher's language use mediates joint construction of learning opportunities and the strategic use of the third turn position and code switching influenced and helped to maintain contingency and support. It is also revealed from the finding that SI provides affordance for dialogic discourse that is co-constructed by the teacher and the learners, facilitating learner participation. The study concluded that the right kind of SI is required to facilitate learning and also emphasizes that failure in success of teaching cannot be attributed to lack of language proficiency or fluency, but due to lack of commitment, confidence and perseverance that is required to provide the right target language affordance.*

Key words: Scaffolding interaction, Dialogic discourse, Code switching, Participation.

1. INTRODUCTION

Scaffolding interaction (SI), influenced by Vygotsky's socio cultural theory (SCT) is particularly relevant to the teaching and learning of English as a second language (ESL) as it emphasizes the interactive social nature of learning and the contingent, collaborative support and development (Walqui, 2006). Forman (2008) defines SI as "the ways in which teachers verbally interact with students in whole class contexts for pedagogic purpose" (p.323). It is one form of mediation that has received much attention by researchers working in the sociocultural paradigm (Donato, 1994, 2000; DiCamilla & Anton, 1997). The capacity to learn through SI is itself a fundamental feature of human intelligence, and that a child's potential for learning is revealed and realized in interactions with more knowledgeable people (Vygotsky, 1981). The scaffolding process emerges in the context of classroom interaction, where the utterance of one participant is contingent on the utterance of the other.

The neo-Vygotskian interpretation of teaching and learning is explained using the concept of scaffolding, which was first developed by Wood, Bruner and Ross (1976) to refer to parental tutoring of infants. According to the authors, scaffolding is the act of reducing cognitive load, where support is provided by the adult to the child in a methodical way in the process of learning. Donato (1994) defines scaffolding as a dialogically constituted inter-psychological mechanism that promotes the learners' internalization of knowledge co-

constructed in shared activity. In ESL context, it is the guided assistance to learners provided by the teacher. Van Lier (1988) states that L1 (first language) can be used as a scaffold to facilitate L2 (second language) learning. According to Rogoff (1990), scaffolding implies the expert's active position towards continual revisions of the scaffolding in response to the emerging capabilities of the learner, whether it be learners' error or limited capabilities, this can be a signal for the adult to upgrade the scaffolding. As the learner begins to take on more responsibility for the task, the adult dismantles the scaffold indicating that the child has benefited from the assisted performance and internalized the task provided by the previous scaffold mechanism.

In the context of ESL teaching, two features are significantly important for rural learners whose only source of English exposure is the ESL classroom: Expert support for lower proficiency learners; provision of the right kind of expert support that will help learners to move to higher levels, beyond which they can achieve independently. The current study examines how the teachers' language (L1/ and L2) use provides SI to view learning as a shared activity between teacher and learners. Given the need to demonstrate the identified features in the classroom discourse, this study addresses the following research questions:

- I. How does the language used by the teacher in the classroom provide pedagogic support for emergence of learning?
- II. How can SI support teachers to improve learner participation in ESL classrooms?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Concept of scaffolding in socio cultural theory

Vygotsky's socio cultural theory (SCT) is founded on the premise that language learning is a social activity that takes place when participants jointly construct learning opportunities during the process of interaction (Vygotsky, 1978; Rogoff, 1990; Wells, 1999; Wertch, 1991). Based on this claim, Vygotsky (1981) argued that human thought is shaped by human language and that "...the very essence of cultural development is in the collision between mature cultural forms of behaviour and the primitive forms that characterize the child's behaviour" (p.151). The implications drawn from the socio cultural context has relevance to language learning that takes place in the ESL classroom. This suggests that the 'collision of behaviours' occurs within the medium of shared teacher-pupil talk, where knowledge is exchanged and new understanding is developed. Mercer (2010) believes that talk is "... a social mode of thinking...", and states, "through talking - and listening - information gets shared, explanations offered, ideas may change, alternative perspectives become available". (p.95). Vygotsky reasons that children learn in a social context by being mediated by adults through the tool of language and they gradually seek independence to engage in activities.

Influenced by Vygotsky's view, the nature of instructional process is embodied in the zone of proximal development. The notion of Scaffolding as described by Bruner (1978): "...refers to the steps taken to reduce the degrees of freedom in carrying out some task so that the child can concentrate on the difficult skill she is in the process of acquiring" (p.19). In the context of a bilingual ESL classroom, as pointed out by Forman (2008)

"scaffolding interaction fulfil complementary purposes, with the Prompting providing a check of students'L1-L2 comprehension of meaning, and the Dialoguing first positioning students as members of the wider shared culture, then inviting them (students) to explore a linguistic artefact. Thus the teacher's Dialoguing has taken a metalinguistic turn, as she draws upon both L1 and L2 in order to consider how to render meaning across languages/ cultures"(p.326).

Classroom discourse becomes dialogic when ideas are exchanged through discussions where the teacher creates a conducive environment for learners to construct knowledge. In contrary to positive teacher student interaction, the discourse becomes monologic when teacher uses the IRF sequence (Sinclair & Coulthard, 1975) where the teacher controls the flow of delivery with minimum input from the students (Nystrand et al, 2003).

Teaching ESL to low proficiency learners requires support and contingent responses that is sensitive not only to the pupils' cognitive understanding of the task, but also to their level of English language understanding. What is needed is a language conscious and language explicit approach to scaffolding.

2.2 The Three Turn Sequence of classroom discourse

The initiation-response-feedback (IRF) model is a three turn model developed by Sinclair and Coulthard (1975) to analyse classroom discourse at the Birmingham School. This is referred as initiation-response-Evaluation (IRE) by Mehan (1979) and triadic dialogue by Lemke (1990). The three turn sequence appears in a predictable pattern where the initiation is usually the teacher's question (I) followed by learners' response (R) and a follow up (F) move in the form of teacher feedback (F) or an evaluation (E) by teacher.

The third turn F/E, in the traditional sense is usually a comment which is a signal to mark the end. Grounded within the sociocultural view, it is argued that classroom interaction scaffolds students' learning and that teacher talk in IRF model is of the scripted type (Wells, 1999). This is reiterated by Tharp and Gallimore (1988) as it constitutes closed teacher questions and brief pupil answers, which do not provide much opportunity for learners to build upon, but appears to be superficial praise rather than diagnostic feedback. These views claim that there is emphasis on recalling information rather than genuine exploration of a topic. This form of questioning therefore seeks predictable correct answers known by the teacher and this discourse very rarely assists learners to develop their language use. Based on this claim, IRF model analyses discourse that is predictable in formal pedagogic interaction. However, the discourse in classroom conversation is unpredictable and dynamic that calls for turn –by-turn basis (Seedhouse, 2004)

Criticism is also levelled against the IRF model for being too rigid and more teacher centred as the teacher becomes the authoritarian to decide turn taking and becomes the controller of classroom discourse (Mehan, 1979) thus limiting the opportunity for learners to participate. In a similar vein, Nassaji and Wells (2000) state that giving a comment as evaluation during the follow up move can deprive the learners from participating further. Considering the inadequacies of this model to account for the sociocultural aspect of learning, scholars call for an approach that analyses classroom discourse in a socio cultural perspective, which examines both content and functions of spoken language (Mercer, 2010).

2.3 Classroom Discourse Analysis: A Socio Cultural Perspective

With the study of language learning towards the socially oriented approaches, there has been fundamental shifts in classroom interaction analysis to uncover the ideas and explanations that are co-constructed socially during discussions and internalised by individuals (Vygotsky, 1978; Mortimer & Scott, 2003).

Though the IRF model is more likely to view learning as the collection of a series of facts which can be recalled, the strength of it to facilitate interaction in the classroom can be determined in the way the teacher uses the third turn position. According to Lemke (1990), there can be “true dialogue” (p. 55) that does not require a third evaluation turn to make it a triadic dialogue but, rather an optional turn such as a teacher comment that is similar to the teacher elaboration in triadic dialogue. Lee (2007) asserts that third turn cannot be explained just by using terminology such as ‘evaluation’, ‘feedback’, or ‘follow-up’. He claims that the third turn position should be viewed as a place holder that opens up an analytic possibility for describing the communicative acts that teachers display. According to the author, the third turn position is particularly important because its relevance and influence shapes across the contingencies generated by the students’ second turn, which itself is contingent upon the prior turn by the teacher. In a similar vein, Mortimer and Scott (2003) state that third turn can induce further response from students, where the teacher can repeat students’ utterance to signal continuation or ask for elaboration. Adding to these views, Green leaf and Freedman (1993) suggest a methodology that aims to analyse classroom interaction that promotes intellectual development. Although the focus is on a teacher fronted classroom with IRF exchanges, this does not function to elicit the course content. Rather, the discourse, although not conversational in its pattern, seems to engage learners in constructing knowledge and collaborative learning. With the shift towards student- centred learning, the teachers need to be more responsive and their talk need to be contingent. It is believed that the IRF pattern can be used to direct learners towards student centred learning (Wells, 1999; Nassaji & Wells, 2000).

For Wood (1988 cited in Walqui, 2006), scaffolding is “tutorial behaviour that is contingent, collaborative and interactive” (p.96). Behaviour is contingent when an action depends on i.e., influences and is influenced by other actions. It is collaborative when the end result whether it is a conversation or a solution to a problem is jointly achieved and it is interactive when it includes the activity of two or more people who are mutually engaged. This view shows the importance of analysing classroom discourse to explore how SI supports learners to participate in the classroom discourse during the learning process. Hence it is important to

understand the dynamic and creative feature of interaction. Contingency, a key feature in describing the nature of conversational interaction is something that happens accidentally in a moment during a process. According to Van Lier (1996), the dynamic feature in conversational interaction is described as contingency. This has potential to understand the interaction that takes place during the learning process in the ESL classroom. As Van Lier (1996) states, contingency plays a key pedagogical role during the teaching and learning process in the classroom. For Schegloff (2001) “discourse – extended or multi-unit talk production – be understood processually, that is, as one sort of (contingent) product of conversation, rather than conversation being understood taxonomically, as simply one sub type of discourse” (p.230). Based on Schegloff’s view, Vine (2008) claims “classroom discourse to be contingent, in its organization, on the patterns, structures and practices that make conversation possible” (p. 673).

The study conducted by Vine (2008) employed both Conversation Analysis (CA) and SCT of learning to analyse classroom interaction between a teacher and a student in Switzerland. CA was used to analyse language use and SCT was used to interpret the concept of mediation. Vine’s study reveals that both approaches, though different in ontological terms can be used as partners to analyse classroom discourse. Though SCT on its own is not a theory of language use, within its framework, it claims language to be an important mediation tool (Vine 2008).

Through analysis of the classroom discourse within the SCT framework, this study examines whether the teachers’ language use provides SI to view learning as a shared activity between teacher and learners. Vine’s (2008) SCT analysis is relevant to the current study in interpreting the way teacher’s language use provides SI to enhance learners’ understanding in a way that the jointly constructed meaning goes beyond what the learner was able to do on his/her own.

3. METHODOLOGY

The study adopted a qualitative approach within the interpretivist paradigm. Data was drawn from the data collected for a larger study conducted in the Sammanthurai Education zone, involving 50 teachers who teach ESL to junior secondary level classes and their students. Data for the larger study was collected through classroom observation complemented with face-to-face semi-structured interviews with teachers and students. The data was audio recorded and transcribed for analysis. In the context of the present study, the researcher selected one of the transcripts that offered patterns of discourse to interpret the scaffolding function in a systematic and comprehensive way. The classroom discourse of the selected transcript was analysed to explain the concept of SI using the six scaffolding functions developed by Wood et al. (1976, p. 98).

1. Recruitment – enlisting a learner’s interest in and adherence to requirements of a task.
2. Reduction in degrees of freedom – simplifying the task by reducing numbers of constituent acts required, and letting learners do what they can do while the tutor fills in the rest.
3. Direction maintenance – keeping the learner in pursuit of a particular objective, encouraging to keep the learner motivated, and making it worthwhile for the learner to risk a next step.

4. Marking critical features – accentuating features of a task that are relevant, providing information about discrepancies between learner production and what the tutor would recognize as correct production.
5. Frustration control – face saving for errors, exploiting the learner’s wish to please.
6. Demonstration – more than simply performing in the presence of a tutee, can involve ‘idealization’ of an act to be performed, can involve tutor completion or explication of partial performance by the learner, with an expectation that the learner will imitate it back in a more appropriate form.

3.1 ANALYSIS OF CLASSROOM DISCOURSE

In order to examine how SI is developed within the medium of discourse between teachers and pupils, all teacher and student utterances were analysed in-depth to see what language is used, for what purpose and how co-adaptation is built upon as discourse proceeds. The scaffolding functions of Wood et.al. (1976) will enable the researcher to interpret the mediational role of language.

Transcript : Grade 9 Lesson: Common childhood games

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| <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. T:Good morning children 2. Ss:Good morning teacher 3. T:Okay, today we are studying about games, (writes the topic on board) all read 4. Ss:Common ..childhood.. games. 5. T:Okay Common ((/komon/)) childhood games, tell, what are the games you know? 6. Ss:(answers heard in the form of choral shouting) 7. T:(teacher feels displeased with the way students respond, so in a raised pitch says) “stop”, “one by one”, you know the answer, then put up your hands 8. S1:cricket ((while raising the hand)) 9. T:yes, what others? 10. S2:Teacher, teacher ((raising the hand)) 11. T:Okay, tell 12. S2:football 13. T:Shaheeka, tell me games for children 14. S3:Teacher, ball playing 15. T:playing ball, think nicely 16. S4:phone games 17. T:yes, computer games^ what other games.... children play veetil la <in house> 18. S1:olichchi pidichi <hide seek> 19. T:ohm <yes>olichi pidichi ((Tamil word for hide & seek)) very good, in English^ 20. Ss:_____ 21. T:try, look your books and tell 22. Ss: hide and seek | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 23. T: hide and seek, illava? ((question tag in tamil, teacher writes on board while saying))
HIDE AND SEEK .. and then^ 24. S3: oadippidichchi (Tamil word for run and catch) 25. T:oadippidichchi Okay, in English? Who can tell..... 26. Ss:_____ 27. T:run and catch (writes on board while saying) RUN AND CATCH 28. Ss:run and catch 29. T:any other game? Sinnapillaikal vilayaadum<children playing>game 30. Ss:_____ 31. T:(closing her eyes, she says) ippa sollunga paarppom <now tell to see> 32. S4:teacher,kannanpoochchi ((Tamil word for blindman’s Buff)) 33. T:yes very good in English..... blindman’s buff 34. Ss:blindman’s buff 35. T:all say 36. Ss:blindman’s buff 37. T:blindman’s buff, blindman’s buff {(/buf/)} enrum sollalaam <can also say> yes, blindman’s buff enraal <means> kannanpoochchi vilayattu, ellarum sollunga paarpom < all say to see>((pointing to S1)), how to say kannanpoochchi vilayattu <game>, in English 38. S1:blindman’s buff 39. T:yes, blindman’s buff, tell me the children’s games (directing towards the board) Hide |
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| <p>40. Ss:Hide and seek, run and catch, blindman's buff</p> <p>41. S1:Teacher, Peep bo peek a boo</p> <p>42. T: Yes... ((referring the text, says)) babies games (and adds it to the list</p> <p>43. Ss:Hide and seek, run and catch, blindman's buff, Peep-Bow, Peek-a boo</p> <p>44. T: again^</p> | <p>45. Ss:Hide and seek, run and catch, blindman's buff, Peep-Bow, Peek-a boo</p> <p>46. T: all say</p> <p>47. T: all write this in your exercise book then turn page sixty eight, read the lesson and answer the questions</p> <p>48. Ss: ((Engage in the activity))</p> |
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From a socio cultural perspective the open question in line 5 “what are the games you know?” is authentic as it can have an infinite number of answers that is not predefined (Graesser & Persons 1994). This type of question gives learners more opportunities to construct knowledge (Nassaji & Wells 2000) and motivate them to participate in the lesson. (Nystrand & Gameron 1991). This open ended question in L2 provides recruitment scaffolding function where the teacher attempts to enlist the learners' interest and adherence to the task and to draw ideas about an aspect of the curriculum content. The teacher's utterance “yes, what others?” in line 9 shows that the teacher's feedback is a probing feedback where she first gives a positive evaluative feedback as “yes” followed by a verbal cue requiring further response using a prompting question (Forman 2008). This suggests that teacher's third move had been a high level evaluation, where the prompt acts as a scaffolded interaction allowing learners to re-position themselves away from the responders'role to the receivers of feedback. This results in emergence of learning with expert's direction. The teacher adopts the same strategy in line 15, “playing ball, think nicely” where she strategically rephrases the word order from “ball playing” to “playing ball”. This shows that there is L1 interference as the child gives the direct translation of L1 word order instead of the L2 syntax. Employing the scaffolding function of frustration control, the teacher tactfully corrects the learner in a constructive manner by repeating the phrase with the correct word order. This line also suggests that the teacher uses the marking critical feature function to give the correct form in order to keep the learner in pursuit of a particular objective, which in turn motivates the learner to think further.

Instances of cued elicitation that elicited a single word or short phrase can be seen in line 17 “yes computer games^” where the rise in intonation makes students identify that the teacher maintains direction scaffolding function, for students to take turn. The value of L1 in scaffolding interaction can be seen in the same line “ yes computer games^ what other games? children play *veetil la* <in house>, here the teacher framed post expansion in L1. While this can be taken as a display question, where the teacher expects an answer that is known by the teacher, it also shows that the teacher simplified the task employing the scaffolding function of reduction in degrees of freedom. The teacher at this point feels that exclusive use of L2 was ineffective (clarified at the interview) in pursuit of a particular objective and reduced the degree of freedom by requesting learners to think in their L1. The response *olichchi pidichi* <hide seek> in L1 in line 18 shows that the teacher had used L1 to scaffold L2 learning. The moment teacher hears the response in L1, Her shared L1 is used for contingency, where she comes out with a positive feedback in L1 in line 19 “*ohm* <yes>*olichchi pidichi* (Tamil word for hide & seek) very good, in

English[^]” and uses a rising intonation requesting for the L2 equivalent. As can be seen a break occurs in contingency in line 20, where the learners do not demonstrate knowledge of it, consequently, without giving much wait time, the learners are directed to refer the lesson in the text. The teacher could have self-selected to respond but using the scaffolding function of marking critical features, she requested the learners to respond. The teacher’s utterance in line 23 “hide and seek, *illava?* (question tag in tamil, teacher writes on board while saying) HIDE AND SEEK and then” is a mark of confirmation using an L1 question tag, the L1 equivalent for “no”, which is a feature of Sri Lankan English commonly used by Sri Lankan bilinguals. Line 29 “any other game? *Sinnapillaikal vilayaadum* <children playing>game” is also notable for the use of L1. The post expansion of the statement in the form of a question shows that the teacher embeds the L2 word “game” in the L1 sentence focusing the attention of the students to the key words.

Another strategy used by the teacher in line 31 “(closing her eyes, she says) *ippa sollunga paarppom* <now tell to see> “to maintain contingency is to make information available for learners non-verbally by using a gesture: closing her eyes to employ the scaffolding function of reducing the degree of freedom followed by an L1 utterance to focus her attention on curriculum content where she tries to jointly construct meaning with the learners. There were many instances when teacher employed the scaffolding function of demonstration to get students repeat after her. The teacher’s limited proficiency in L2 is reflected in line 37 blindman’s buff, blindman’s buff (/buf/) *enrum sollalaam* yes, blindman’s buff enraal <means> *kannanpoochchi vilayattu, ellarum sollunga paarpom* < all say to see>(pointing to S1), how to say *kannanpoochchi vilayattu* <game>, in English?

The confused state of the teacher shows that she is unsure whether it is pronounced as /buf/ or /baf/ as was revealed through the repetition of the particular word (which she declared to be true at the interview). She intelligently presents it as two alternative pronunciations and there after seeks for clarification from the student whom she believes to be more competent than the others (clarified at interview). The student’s response in line 38 is confirmed with a positive feedback in line 39. This also is an instance of co-construction of knowledge. There was only one instance of learner initiation, which is reflected in line 41. This phenomenon is worthy of consideration as the learner, through this utterance scaffolds the learning process by contributing to the construction of knowledge. The teacher had forgotten (as clarified at the interview) to relate to the babies’ games, which was initiated by one of the learners. This suggests that a peer can also perform the function of an expert in construction of knowledge. This can be an instance of peer scaffolding where the learners contribute towards the co-construction of knowledge.

4. DISCUSSION

The SCT analysis of the teacher’s use of scaffolding instruction shows how language use (L1/and L2) mediates the joint construction of learning opportunities. A close examination of the sequence of the classroom discourse show a deviated pattern from the IRF structure. This confirms that the IRF pattern can take various forms within the same context, which is significantly determined by the way the teacher uses the third turn position. The teacher’s strategic use of the third turn

position conforms Lee's (2007) study as it influenced and maintained contingencies generated by the students' utterance, which itself was contingent upon the prior turn by the teacher. The teacher's use of an open question in the first turn is a good example of an authentic question which opens more opportunity for learners to come up with a variety of responses (Nystrand et al. 2003). This type of authentic questions along with high level evaluation with more cued elicitations reflects the effort taken by the teacher to push learners to participate in classroom discussion. As there was no restriction posed on exclusive use of L2, the learners used L1 to participate in the classroom discussion. Conforming Forman (2008), dialoguing takes place bilingually with Tamil supporting English at key points of the lesson during discussion. This shows that teacher's dialoguing has taken a metalinguistic turn. The strategies adopted by the teacher helped learners to be more interactive and participatory. The affordances provided by teacher facilitated learner participation resulting in the co construction of learning opportunities, which in turn motivated the learners to be engaged and enhance their understanding.

The study lends further support to the value of code switching which is a readily available resource for ESL teachers when they share the L1 of the learners. The teacher, in the opinion of the researcher is a limited linguistic proficiency ESL teacher, which was revealed during the observation and interview. However, this was not a limitation as she was able to carry out her teaching in L2 without any obvious disruption. It is noteworthy that she used a justifiable amount of L1 that acted as a scaffold to facilitate L2 learning. The teacher used L1 at appropriate times to ensure contingency and support, which she employed as a discourse strategy. Conforming Carless (2004), the teacher's and students' homogenous ethnic and linguistic background facilitated to conduct an interactive discussion during the presentation stage.

Though the teacher did not adopt scripted question and answer session with only display questions, in the perspective of the researcher, there were two groups of students who were seen to be passive during the lesson. On inquiring about these students, the teacher said that they were weak and do not show interest in any of the subjects. The researcher advised the teacher to have a mixed ability grouping and focus her attention on them, which will motivate them to be involved in the lesson. Though this study analysed the transcript of one lesson, inadequate to be generalized, the researcher posits that there is a variety of strategies embedded in the selected illustrative lesson to show how teacher provided affordance through scaffolding instruction. The finding of this study can inform the teachers about the significance of the third turn position of the IRF pattern and the need to use cued elicitation to lead discussion in the ESL classrooms. The provision of SI not only facilitated a dialogic discourse co constructed by both the teacher and learners but facilitated to maximize participation of learners, which is one of the challenges of the ESL teachers. A significant implication of this study is to help teachers reflect on their own teaching in order to adopt reflective practice as one of the norms to improve their teaching methodology.

5. CONCLUSION

With the paradigm shift from teacher centred practice to student- centred teaching, the teacher's prime role is to give the right kind of support to facilitate learning. The

study highlights the value of the third turn position of IRF in providing opportunities for joint construction of meaning. Failure to provide scaffolding instruction to learners in L1/and L2 cannot be attributed to limited language proficiency or fluency in the target language, but it is due to the lack of commitment, confidence and perseverance that is required to provide the right target language affordance.

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